A TIP FROM SHANKAR

—R.K. MURTHI

Memory has a strange way of digging out, from the scores of incidents stored in the grey cells (often so deeply interned that they remain irretrievable), some snippet or incident that has made a deep imprint on one's mind.

It was a casual question from a friend, as to what I considered the most vital guidance I had received from the late Shankar (Mr. Shankar Pillai, who started life as a cartoonist, but found his life's work in serving the cause of children) during my forays into writing, which made me look within. Then the scene was recreated, by my mind, vividly.

The year was 1970.

I had already been in the field of writing for about ten years, and made a fair amount of impact through my contributions to middle columns in major newspapers. A large number of my articles/short stories for the very young appeared in the *Young Pals Corner*, then a part of *The Sunday Standard*, (now the *Sunday Indian Express*). I had also made occasional contributions to *Shankar's Weekly*, the Indian magazine which served the cause of humour, the only one of its kind in India. (Nearly fifteen years ago, in 1976, the magazine folded up, and, since then, India has been trudging along without a distinct genre of humour of which *Shankar's Weekly*, beyond doubt, was the crowning glory).

One day, I walked into the cubicle of my friend Mr. K. Ramakrishnan, then the editor of *Children's World*. I wanted to get his views on a short story for children which I had written. He was about to sit with me and go over the story, when Shankar, with his eternal smile and childlike grin walked in. He glared at us, and then joked, "Must be making some conspiracy. Whom are you planning to topple? Not poor me, I hope!"

Then he sat down on one of the empty chairs, waiting for us to answer.

Mr. Ramakrishnan quietly handed over the story, written by me, the story which I wanted him to critically analyse.

Shankar clutched the sheaf of papers in his hand, while asking me to fill him with the details of my literary activities. Then he asked, "Do you think you now know enough to get into the field of children's literature in a big way?"

I remained silent.

I did not know how to answer him. I sensed, deep within, that I had had some success with the pen, but to claim that I knew enough would be to indulge in fanciful dreams. That, I decided, would be false, unrealistic. The very fact that I had come to my friend to seek his views on the short story, I realised, sprang out of a feeling that I still had a lot to learn.

I also remembered a Tamil cliche which asserts, "What we know can be held in our palm; what we don't know is as vast as the ocean."

"Why are you silent?" Shankar nettled me.

"To be frank, I am a novice. I am trying to learn to write for the very young. I know I have a long, long way to go. I know the basics, but I have to master them, make them stand by me, as you have mastered them," I replied, in a polite tone.

"You want me to read this story and offer you tips?" Shankar asked me.

"That will be an act of kindness that I will never forget," I told him, while managing to exchange a wink with Mr. Ramakrishnan.

Shankar still did not open out the sheaf of sheets to read my story. Instead, he held the bunch, rather casually, while telling me, "Better still, I suggest you be your own critic. Now, tell me, are you ready to tear your story to shreds, by developing the skill to look at it with critical eyes?"

That comment made me a little unsure of myself.

"Perhaps, I can help you. Listen. Remember that the first draft is spontaneous, easily recorded if you have had the story in your head for long, if the story has seeped into your very being. So, the narration comes easily. The flow too is natural. Don't pause to correct or to amend, but move on, if possible, till the story is recorded. Then leave the manuscript aside, for a few days. During this period, completely forget about the story. Come back to it, with a fresh mind. Read the story, now, critically. See where the story does not sustain the reader's interest. Try to identify where the narration flags. See whether there are any flaws in the basic storyline. Be merciless in trimming down words which appear to be redundant. Go through the story with the finest of combs. Weed out anything that stands out at odds," Shankar explained.

"And then?" I managed to indicate that I would like to be fully instructed in the trade.

"Then, rewrite the story, improve the flow of the language, tone up the conversational bits, induct some humour, light banter, gentle asides. Ensure that the characters have distinct traits. Let them be natural. Let them behave normally. If you have the story and the characters who go into the story clearly drawn in your mind, you will find them appealing, true to life," Shankar turned to me to assure himself that I was receptive to his lesson.

"I understand," I reacted, in all humility.

"Above all, there is a test, or, perhaps a means of a test of the success of your story. Want to know?" Shankar asked.

"Yes, of course," I responded with keenness.

"It is very simple. Supposing you have a story which is written with a particular target group. Say, your story, you feel, is aimed at a six year-old child. Then, try to get back in time and space. Start thinking like a six year-old. Look at the world through the eyes of a six year-old child. Develop the skill to be a child, in a trice. If you can develop that skill, you will always find that your story shall go well with the target audience. This, I know, is not easy. For one may consciously try to think like a six year-old. But, the experiences of a lifetime do colour this conscious effort. Even this is not a bad thing, if this conscious attempt to look at the world through the mental response of a child gives new contours to your experiences. In other words, be as childlike as you can be. Let the wonder, the mirth, the innocence of the child enrich your narration. That is how you win the child. Yet, you are an adult; and you know something more than what the child knows. Transmit some of your own experiences, in a language and medium that shall not turn the child away. Like giving sugar-coated pills, which prove beneficial. In brief, if you want to succeed in the field of children's literature,

there is only one sure, tested method. *Be a child at heart.* Remember that the world of the child is filled with fantasies. He does not question many things which we do. The folktales, which are interesting interpretations of natural phenomena, carry conviction with children. We also, due to our modern day learning of science and the many facts of life, begin to see the folktales as figments of the imagination. But, if you remain aware of the child and his receptivity, his curiosity that is never restrained, you shall easily find acceptance from him." Shankar then asked me whether he should now read the story and offer me his comments.

I was taken aback.

He perhaps understood that he had swept me off my feet. He gently placed his arm on my back, smiled and said, "Take this story with you. See whether you can improve it. Test it, by reading it out to a child in the targetted age group. See what impact it makes. Be watchful. See where the child seems to lose interest. Find out what words do not make an immediate impact on him. Then, you will know what more needs to be done to make this story truly good. After you do the exercise, you may come back to me. Most probably, I may, then, have very little to add by way of constructive criticism!" Shankar grinned, his cherubic mien gaining a rare lustre.

"Thank you, dear sir," I mumbled, while he held me rather firmly, using me as a support to get up. Then, he moved out, but that encounter remained firmly embedded in my mind.

Today, by asking me a question, my friend touched this very spot in my memory, retrieved the encounter, and helped me relive that rare moment of enlightenment when I received a valuable lesson from a great master.

The Childhood World

It is impossible
For anyone to enter
Our small world
The adults don't understand us
They think we're childish
No one can get into our world
It has a wall twenty feet high
And adults have only a ten feet ladder

Sapna G. Kalantae (9 year old girl)